

NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUND NO. 5-6022
GARY EDQUIST

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THE SKYLAB IS FALLING

ANNCR:

THE DIRECTOR OF AMERICA'S JOHNSON SPACE CENTER IN HOUSTON, TEXAS SAYS THE SKYLAB SPACE STATION WILL SOON FALL TO EARTH. DOCTOR CHRIS KRAFT SAID IN AN INTERVIEW (FRIDAY, JULY 21) IN THE DALLAS, TEXAS MORNING NEWS THAT THE GIANT SPACE STATION MAY PLUNGE BACK TO EARTH AS EARLY AS NEXT SPRING. GARY EDQUIST HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT ON THE PROBLEMS FACING SKYLAB.

VOICE:

EVER SINCE IT WAS BLASTED INTO SPACE IN 1973, THE SKYLAB SPACE LABORATORY HAS HAD A DIFFICULT LIFE. ONE SOLAR GENERATING PANEL WAS TORN OFF DURING THE TAKE OFF AND ANOTHER JAMMED, FORCING THE THREE ASTRONAUTS -- WHO CAME ABOARD LATER -- TO REPAIR THE STATION IN ORBIT. AFTER THREE CREWS HAD COMPLETED EXPERIMENTS, SKYLAB WAS ABANDONED IN 1974. BUT AMERICA'S FIRST SPACE STATION HAD ACCOMPLISHED ITS MISSION BY PROVING THAT HUMANS COULD LIVE AND WORK IN SPACE FOR PROLONGED PERIODS WITHOUT ILL EFFECTS.

WHEN THE GIANT SATURN 1-B ROCKET LAUNCHED SKYLAB, NASA (NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION) SCIENTISTS PREDICTED IT WOULD HAVE A TEN YEAR LIFE SPAN. ACCORDING TO NASA PLANS, LONG BEFORE THE END OF ITS LIFE, AMERICAN ASTRONAUTS WOULD ARRIVE, USING THE STILL UNTESTED SPACE SHUTTLE TO HELP MOVE SKYLAB TO A SAFER ORBIT. DOCTOR KRAFT SAID IN HIS INTERVIEW THAT HE FEARS THE SPACE LABORATORY WILL GRADUALLY SLIP FROM ITS THREE-HUNDRED-TWENTY KILOMETER ORBIT AND CRASH TO EARTH BEFORE THE SPACE SHUTTLE IS EVER TESTED. (OPT) COMPOUNDING THOSE FEARS IS THE JANUARY CRASH OF A SOVIET NUCLEAR POWERED SATELLITE OVER NORTHERN CANADA. THE CRASH INJURED NO ONE, BUT IT SPREAD RADIO-

ACTIVE DEBRIS OVER A WIDE AREA. UNLIKE THE SOVIET SATELLITE, THE SKYLAB IF IT CRASHES WILL SPREAD NO RADIOACTIVE FRAGMENTS BECAUSE IT DOES NOT CONTAIN A NUCLEAR POWER SYSTEM. (END OPT)

THERE HAVE BEEN OTHER PROBLEMS PLAGUING THE SPACE LABORATORY. SPACE SCIENTISTS SAY NOW THAT THEY GREATLY UNDERESTIMATED SUNSPOT ACTIVITY. SUNSPOTS ARE CRUCIAL TO THE LIFE OF SKYLAB AND ALL OTHER SPACECRAFT ORBITING NEAR THE EARTH BECAUSE THE SOLAR STORMS AFFECT THE EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE. SCIENTISTS SAY INCREASED SUNSPOT ACTIVITY CAUSED THE EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE TO HEAT AND EXPAND, THEREBY SLOWING SKYLAB.

FLIGHT CONTROLLERS HAVE BEEN TRYING BY RADIO SIGNALS SINCE EARLY JUNE TO MANEUVER SKYLAB INTO AN ORBIT WHICH WOULD KEEP IT IN SPACE LONGER, POSSIBLY AS LATE AS SEPTEMBER, 1980. HOWEVER, THERE WAS A SETBACK THURSDAY. TECHNICIANS HAD TO CANCEL EFFORTS TO CHANGE THE ORBIT WHEN A COMPUTER ABOARD SKYLAB USED TO ALIGN SOLAR GENERATING PANELS WITH THE SUN MALFUNCTIONED AND WASTED PRECIOUS FUEL. NOW, AS DOCTOR KRAFT SAYS ABOUT THE ILL-FATED SPACE STATION, "EVERYDAY WE PLAY WITH IT, WE FIND SOMETHING ELSE WRONG."

NASA SCIENTISTS HAVE BEEN MAKING OTHER FEVERISH EFFORTS TO SAVE SKYLAB. ON JULY FIRST THEY ORDERED A THIRTY-TWO MILLION DOLLAR ROCKET BOOSTER FOR THE STATION. AS PLANNED, THE REMOTE-CONTROLLED BOOSTER ENGINE WOULD BE ATTACHED TO SKYLAB, AND THEN SCIENTISTS COULD MOVE THE SPACE STATION TO A HIGHER, AND PRESUMABLY, SAFER ORBIT, OR ELSE SEND IT PLUNGING HARMLESSLY INTO THE PACIFIC OCEAN. THE ROCKET BOOSTER WILL NOT BE READY, HOWEVER, UNTIL SEPTEMBER, 1979, LONG AFTER CHRIS KRAFT PREDICTS SKYLAB WILL FALL TO EARTH. EQUALLY BOTHERSOME IS THAT THE KEY TO THE ENTIRE PLAN, THE U.S. SPACE SHUTTLE, WILL NOT BE READY FOR A

RESCUE MISSION UNTIL OCTOBER, 1979. AGAIN, TOO LATE TO HELP SKYLAB ACCORDING TO CHRIS KRAFT'S PREDICTION.

THE ONLY SOLUTION, IF IT MAY BE CALLED THAT, IS TO ALLOW SKYLAB TO BURN UP AS IT REENTERS THE EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE. MOST OF THE SPACE STATION WOULD DISINTEGRATE IN THE HEAT OF ITS FIERY RETURN, AND THE OTHER PIECES WOULD FALL INTO THE OCEAN, SINCE THREE FOURTHS OF SKYLAB'S ORBIT CARRIES IT OVER WATER. SPACE SCIENTISTS SAY THE CHANCES OF SKYLAB REENTERING THE ATMOSPHERE OVER A POPULATED AREA ARE VERY SLIM. DOCTOR KRAFT SAYS IF SKYLAB DOES FALL, THE CHANCES OF BEING HIT BY A FRAGMENT WOULD BE "SORT OF LIKE BEING HIT BY LIGHTNING...OR A METEORITE." AND THAT SAYS CHRIS KRAFT IS SOMETHING THAT DOES NOT APPEN VERY OFTEN. DOCTOR KRAFT SAID IN HIS INTERVIEW THAT IT IS NOT GOOD SITUATION, BUT THAT HE AND OTHER SPACE SCIENTISTS ARE MAKING A DETERMINED EFFORT TO SAVE SKYLAB AND PREVENT ANY DANGER, TO THE PEOPLE ON PLANET EARTH.

BML/RTD